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ABSTRACT

The liberal arts-vocational education controversy is examined in this article through a series of fictitious letters based on historical facts that present the thoughts of key educational personalities regarding the community college's role in providing vocational education and liberal arts education. Part I, which takes the form of a letter and information summary addressed to community college students, explains the differences between liberal arts/transfer degree programs and vocational/career programs. Part II offers an overview of the development of the community college curriculum and the numerous reform movements which affected it. The important contributions of the Yale Report of 1828, the Morrill Act of 1862, and post-Civil War expansion and reconstruction efforts are reviewed. Part III presents the fictitious letters, representing the views of Francis Wayland, President of Brown University; Henry P. Tappan, President of the University of Michigan; Henry David Thoreau; a Confederate Civil War Cadet; Ezra Cornell; Charles William Eliot; and James McCosh, President of Princeton University. (EJV)

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THE VOCATIONAL-LIBERAL ARTS CONTROVERSY: LOOKING BACKWARDS

by

Sue L. Miles

Waubonsee Community College

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Abstract:

Knowledge of the vocation-liberal arts controversy that has raged throughout history will help the community college instructor of today better understand some of the obstacles college have faced as founders, administrators, society members at large and students moved toward the offerings of the modern day curriculum. It will also help interested readers better understand the value and definition of both liberal arts and vocational programs. The article contains an introduction explaining the vocational-liberal arts concept (the letter is written in the form of a letter to students), and an overview explaining the vocational-liberal arts controversy in relation to historical beginnings, early rumblings, causes and outcomes. A series of "fictitious letters" based on historical facts, dated between 1850 and 1900 will provide interested readers with thoughts of key personalities regarding the vocational-liberal arts controversy.

September 1986
Waubonsee Community College

Dear Students,

Today you sit before me as you do every Fall semester and ask me to explain to you the meaning of a vocational degree or certificate. You ask me whether or not an Associate of Applied Science Degree is as meaningful as an Associate of Science Degree. Some of you speak of counselors warning you against entering a major that makes you less transferable to a senior institution.

I have recently completed a study of the history of higher education. History offers us insight into why things are as they have become and I gained much knowledge that I will enjoy sharing with you. The vocation - liberal arts controversy has raged throughout history and as you remind me today, by your questions, the debate is ongoing. Which is of most value - the liberal arts or vocational education? For you to decide it would be helpful for you to know the differences between the two.

Following is a written explanation of the offerings. Perhaps there are some of you who would like to know more. How did vocational education begin and why was it so controversial? For you I pass my completed assignment done for the Emergence of Higher Education Seminar at Nova University. I hope you will find it of interest.

Sincerely,

Sue Miles
Waubonsee Community College

THE PROGRAMS AND THEIR DIFFERENCES

The Liberal Arts

You may enroll in 23 transfer degree programs designed as the first two years of baccalaureate education leading to the Associate in Science and Associate in Arts degrees. The fields included in these programs are liberal arts as well as sciences and pre-professional. Liberal arts is a term that refers to those academic disciplines of languages, history, and philosophy, which provide information of general cultural concern. The programs are generally patterned after the corresponding programs at four year colleges. (Waubonsee Community College Self Study: 18) If you wish to transfer to a four-year institution one of the above programs may be best for you.

The Vocational

Career opportunities are provided through 23 occupational degree programs designed to prepare you as students to enter the work force. These programs are called vocational-technical and lead to the two-year Associate in Applied Science degree. They provide job training, retraining, work experience and upgrading of skills to meet individual, local and state manpower needs. Some of the occupational courses have been transferable at the discretion of the four-year institution. Vocational skills courses provide training and upgrading that may not be a part of a certificate or degree program. These courses are designed for individuals who may wish to upgrade specific skills, to refresh previously learned skills, to re-enter the job market, or to retrain to meet local manpower needs. (Waubonsee Community College Self Study: 19)

A general rule of thumb is that if you plan to complete your education at a four year institution you should consider pursuing a transfer program that includes the above mentioned liberal arts, sciences and pre-professional fields. If your goal is to assume immediate employment in the community you might want to choose a vocational-technical program. In any case, it is always wise to consult both a counselor and an instructor if you have questions.

PART II - AN OVERVIEW FROM HISTORY

AN OVERVIEW FROM HISTORY

Early Rumblings

It seems that nothing remains in a state of inertia for long especially in a country that is and has always grown at such a rapid pace. America not only conquered a vast unknown land and developed an advanced technological society but it accepted and assimilated countless immigrants from all over the world, as well as created a democratic social order. Higher education in the form of colleges played an important role in that development. Nothing comes easy, however, and needless to say people have always begun from where they started. The early American college curriculum was based on the classical traditions of England. This began to be seen by many as inappropriate for the new land. As democracy developed so did the need for an expanded, more democratic system of education.

Attempts at curriculum reform were made but the Yale Report of 1828 put an end to most. Bryant, Kintzer, Wattenbarger (1986:46) explain:

> It was a report emphasizing the old course of study, no electives, Aristotelian psychology of learning, use of texts and recitation, and primary service to the aristocracy. This report virtually set education back fifty years.

People were reluctant to give up tradition and unsure of what would happen to education should they branch out into courses that had never been defined as meaningful. With changes in America, the much needed curriculum reform simply could not remain dormant forever. Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828 at the same time of the Yale Report. It has been said that Jackson probably never "so much as expressed himself on the subject of higher education (Rudolph:201)", however he came to symbolize the fundamental changes in the new society. Jackson spoke for the rights of the common man. The Jacksonian movement along with basic needs that many could feel and see once again caused

the antiquated curriculum to rumble. Even the Dartmouth case that prevented the legislature from "bringing the college under state control and making it more responsible to the people (Bryant, Kintzer, Wattenenbarger:46)", permitted the colleges to engage in the mood of enterprise, competition and opportunity.

After the Civil War colleges began to address themselves to questions of intellectual and popular purpose. Science had already matured enough to "...shake the colleges loose from some of their old convictions (Rudolph:222)". Mathematics, natural philosophy, botany, and chemistry as well as zoology, geology and mineralogy offered a degree of election thus paving the way for others. Science also fed on the natural enthusiasm and ambition of young students and their interest suggested that perhaps the students should have a voice in what they wanted to study.

"For the new leaders and the new institutions... the old ways and the old curriculum were too narrow, elementary, or superficial."(Rudolph:245) Not enough attention was paid to the technical and practical. With the call of Francis Wayland for a more practical collegiate curriculum and the founding of engineering and scientific schools in the 1840's and 1850's some progress was made toward a more relevant curriculum.

An Instrument of Reform

In 1862 the Morrill Act granted public lands to each state for the support of higher instruction. The Morrill Act which was later called the Morrill Land Grant helped establish agricultural education, dispose public lands, develop

scientific agriculture and expose humble folks to education. Rudolph elaborated:

> The act itself provided for the support in every state of at least one college "where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific or classical studies, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts."

There were difficulties to be faced as this instrument of curriculum reform was put into use. It was uncertain as to how to channel the land grant funds to the operative institutions and there was difficulty in knowing how to set up such a college? There were few trained teachers of agriculture and mechanics and most still felt the old-time farmers and mechanics knew enough to produce well without the practical training. Thus the controversy raged on. Even after greater emphasis on providing technical studies, the farmers and their sons doubted that the education made sense.

Causes

From the early development of higher education it is easy to see how the vocation-liberal arts controversy started and continued. The period following the Civil War was one of expansion for the Northern states and a time of rebuilding for the South. The rapid expansion of industrialization and increasing urbanization brought about the need for vocational offerings. Although many simply longed to hold on to the "old curriculum", there was too much need for practical knowledge. Democracy demanded that the college curriculum be available and meaningful to those who desired the experience. "Vocational and technical education had become a legitimate function of higher education, and everywhere the idea of going to college was being liberated from the class-bound, classical bound traditions which for so long had defined the American collegiate experience." (Rudolph:263) Controversy was inevitable. The introduction of the elective system had paved the way for vocational education.

Outcomes

The vocation-liberal arts controversy led to many improvements in higher education. As a result of the land grants and the individuals who had pushed for reform, the curriculum became more practical. The adding of technical courses led not only to a more democratic education for the majority of college students, but to the founding of state colleges and the rise of universities. Especially because of the land grant and the efforts of Andrew White, the president of Cornell, students were able to expect at the new universities three key ingredients, "...equality of studies, decline of the classics, and free election of courses." (Bryant, Kintzer and Wattenbarger:49) Other universities followed with programs containing those same ingredients. The vocational programs were instrumental in leading to the development of a new system of education. As the curriculums were implemented it was discovered that students needed to be better prepared before reaching the college or university level. Colleges did not want to be responsible for preparatory work as more Americans sought an advanced education. The need for preparation helped promote the development of the high school movement.

Conclusion

The vocation-liberal arts controversy was important because it led to a search for the type of higher education needed for the expanding and rebuilding of the American society after the Civil War. The controversy and its results of added curriculum offerings, gave the students a chance to select training that was meaningful to them. The search for new curriculum meaning and the ultimate implementation of practical course work helped motivate more individuals to become involved in the educational process. At last the students were freed from the boring and mundane classical education that was once the only choice. The controversy also helped shape the high school movement.

PART III - EXCHANGES FROM COLLEGE HISTORY
1850 - 1900

PREFACE

The following exchanges are fictitious in nature however they are based on documentation from the sources listed in the bibliography. They were devised to help create "a feeling" for the vocation-liberal arts controversy that led to a more practical education for all.

Exchanges from College History

Dated between 1850-1900

Subject:

"The Vocation-Liberal Arts Controversy"

SUE MILES
Waubonsee Community College•Sugar Grove, IL 60554

Brown University Corporation
March 28, 1850

Colleagues:

We are now engaged in a course of study which makes no sense in an environment defined by the exploitive possibilities of an abundant continent. We are in the midst of the development of new scientific techniques. Our people have become self-reliant, ambitious and democratic bent on achieving economic and social independence. What, could Virgil and Horace and Homer and Demosthenes, with a little mathematics and natural philosophy, do towards developing the untold resources of this continent?

Let us end the fixed four-year course, thereby offering the students freedom within limits, to carry whatever load they wish; a new system of course accounting that would allot time to a course according to its utility; a system of completely free course election and a system that will enable a student to begin a subject and carry study in it to completion without interruption. We shall within this framework offer a new program of courses in applied science, agriculture, law and teaching.

Gentlemen, I want you to know that my motivation for such radical change comes from my deeply held democratic faith and an awareness of the needs of Brown University. I fear that this may bring dissension, however, we must bring our college into line with the economic and social developments of the age. I trust that you will consider my proposal.*

Yours,

Francis Wayland
President of Brown University

*(Rudolph:239)

May 10, 1852
University of Michigan

Honorable Board of Regents:

There are moments in life which stand as landmarks, terminating the past and at the same time pointing toward a new direction.

It is time to create a great new American university, one which will hold the ideal of a true university, but also respond to popular needs. This university is not to be considered as a vocational institution but an institution that will demonstrate to a skeptical public the meaning of real scholarship. Let us take direction from the German university setting.

We shall have no more acute distinctions drawn between scholastic and practical education; for it will be seen that all true education is practical, and that practice without education is little worth; and there will be dignity, grace, and a resistless charm about scholarship and the scholar.

I have selected Andrew White and Charles Adams to help me offer courses of study leading to earned M.A. and M.S. degrees. Of course your support is of the greatest importance.*

Yours truly,

Henry P. Tappan, President

*(Rudolph:234)

June 8, 1854
Concord, Massachusetts

Dear Benefactor:

I take pen in hand to complain about your beloved Harvard College. The method and psychology of learning holds the traditional college in its grip. The students should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How can our youth better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics. I ask: "Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month, - the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this, - or the boy who had attended the lecture on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a.....penknife from his father? Which would be most likely to cut his fingers? I was informed on leaving Harvard that I had studied navagation! - why, if I had taken one turn down the Harbour I should have known more about it."

I ask you to take a close look at our society. The times require practical knowledge and the state university does not, and cannot supply the demands of the State. Men are needed to take charge of roads, railroads, mines and scientific agriculture. Please do not let the sun go down before asking yourself: "For what useful occupation are the graduates of most of our old colleges fit?" I urge you to take notice and follow with action to help make the necessary curriculum changes that will make education more practical.*

Sincerely yours,

Henry David Thoreau

*(Rudolph:236-237)

Norfolk, May 5, 1861

My Dear Mother,

We arrived here at daylight this morning in two special trains, after nearly twenty hours continued but slow traveling. Our conveyances were again, as for the greater part of our many days journey, cattle cars, or box-cars, as they are termed; but these had been well aired and cleaned, a sort of rough benches fitted into them, and the sliding side-doors kept open, so that our situation, if not comfortable, was at least endurable. One passenger car was attached to each train for the officers and sick of which latter we have already a goodly number. The officers for the most part, remained in the box-cars among the men sharing our discomforts, and assisting in turning us into subjects of merriment.

I know Mother that this is not a life for which you spent all of those hours preparing me. Was it not for your endurance and sacrifice of long hours while preparing me for college would I even be able to write you such a letter. Perhaps you can take comfort in the fact that this will be a short war. Its length is expected to be no more than three months. A favorite saying in the Mobile Cadets is that "any good southerner could whip a dozen yankees." With that confidence could I be away for long? After the proceedings I can move ahead with plans to accomplish your dream for my future - the education for which you so greatly helped me prepare. I know it is your intention for me to become a most proper gentleman, however, I at the time am more concerned with what is practical and that is the war.

The simple lyrics of Dixie that I wrote in a fanciful moment has become the tuneful symbol of Southern nationalism. Our "boys" have composed a set of doggered rhymes to my tune and have been plentifully distributing them on the road, and, I doubt not, these will be preserved as historical relics, when the pretty girls who welcomed us shall have become grandmothers.

I do not wish to forget my own dear grandmother who has been on the bed of affliction for many months. I hope by the time you receive this correspondence that she will be again up and about. Try to keep in good spirits and remember that I am forever your devoted son.

Henry*
(Confederate Civil War Cadet)

*Note: Henry Holtze was a member of the Mobile Cadets. This letter shares information from the contemporary account of one of its members. Henry Holtze later established and edited the remarkable propaganda organ of the Confederacy. The letter reflects the attitude of many young men concerning higher education during this early Civil-war era.
(Harwell:25-26)

November, 1865

Andrew: (Andrew White founding president of Cornell)

I am giving you the responsibility of developing this great new university. The land grant has provided the philosophy for that which I wish you to create: equality of studies, decline of the classics, and free election of courses. I trust you to promote a shift from the controlled, prescribed atmosphere of the old American colleges to a spirit of free inquiry.*

Yours,

Ezra
(Ezra Cornell benefactor of Cornell)

*(Bryant, Kintzer and Wattenbarger:49)

June 10, 1869

Dear John, (John Clifford, president of the board of overseers)

I am writing this letter following the ceremonies last evening to better explain my position. It is time to examine Harvard's prescribed curriculum. The University recognizes no real antagonism between literature and science, and consents to no such narrow alternatives as mathematics or classics, science or metaphysics. We will have them all, and at their best. For those who fear for the classics let them rest assured that it will be generations before the best of American institutions of education will get growth enough to bear pruning. The elective principle will add to the curriculum and take nothing away. The elective principle will foster scholarship because it gives free play to natural preferences and inborn aptitudes. The college therefore must preserve in its efforts to establish, improve, and extend the elective system.*

Yours,

Charles William Eliot

*(Rudolph:291-293)

February, 1885

Dear President Eliot,

I have been asked to engage in a debate with you to be held later this month at the residence of Courtlandt Palmer in New York. This I will gladly accept since completing my survey of Harvard courses. There are twenty... dilettante courses which may be taken. I cannot allow that this is an advance in scholarship.*

*President James McCosh
Princeton University

*(Rudolph:299-300)

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